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From Literature to Literacy

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From Literature to Literacy: Shifting the English Classroom Focus

When you ask an English teacher, “What are you teaching?”, she will often reply with the title of a book.

“I’m teaching *The Stranger* now.”

The response, though, should really sound more like, “We’re studying why and how authors use particular diction and syntax to generate tone.” This answer reveals a focus on literacy rather than on pieces of literature. While whole-class novel study may play a role in English classrooms, English teachers need to re-envision their instructional units from studies of literature to studies of literacy. English teachers need to give students reading options so students can develop their literacy skills.

Many secondary teachers teach one novel at a time. We were taught this way when we were in high school. We were trained to teach this way when we were in college. In 1999, I remember eagerly approaching my first teaching position armed with binders of novel units and lesson plans that required all students to read the same books at the same pace all year. Chapter by chapter, scene by scene, and stanza by stanza, my students completed the readings I selected, answered the questions I asked, completed the activities I designed and wrote the essays I assigned. While some students truly enjoyed the work, most students simply allowed me to pull them through the whole-class novel study with little resistance and (even worse) with little enthusiasm. I knew I was doing something wrong, but I couldn’t figure out what it was.

After attending dozens of conferences and reading hundreds of professional texts, I realized the answer lies in the differentiated instructional model that Carol Tomlinson discusses in her many books. By requiring all students to read the same text all the time, I assumed “one student’s road map for learning is identical to anyone else’s” (Tomlinson 2). I must provide my students with authentic, respectful learning experiences to improve their literacy, and this includes allowing them to choose the books they read.

Students need to read and discuss texts that better fit their interests and/or their reading levels so they can increase their ability to infer meaning, study language, and evaluate literary devices. I must also provide students with reading experiences that allow them to build fluency and stamina so they are prepared to be informed citizens and successful college students (Kittle 20). These goals cannot be accomplished if students slug through a text that may be above their reading level or is completely of no interest to them. In their *Phi Delta Kappan* article, “Farewell to *Farewell to Arms*: Deemphasizing the Whole Class Novel,” Douglas Fisher and Gay Ivey argue that whole-class novel study is “neither standard-centered or student-centered,” as the standards focus on literacy skills not particular texts and students cannot meet these skills because the texts often do not interest them or are too difficult to read (495). In her book, *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller argues that “Teaching whole-class novels does not create a society of literate people” (123). While I have not abandoned whole-class novel studies (yet), I believe we must create English classrooms that provide more balanced literacy programs and give students respectful options for reading that challenge them and inspire them to keep reading.

Contemplating this shift of English instruction can appear daunting. Yet, if teachers start slowly, implementing one instructional methodology at a time, it will not be so overwhelming. The best strategies with which to begin are literature circles and free reading. These methodologies allow students choice, while they also allow the teacher to build purposeful lessons around literacy objectives.

Literature Circles

Literature Circles provide students a guided choice of text to read. While many iterations of literature circles have emerged over the last fifteen years, I rely on Harvey Daniels’ book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, as the seminal guide to implement productive small group studies of texts.

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Literature circles offer students guided reading choices and allow them to direct their conversations about text in small groups of peers. The teacher must release his control of the discussion. Instead, “the teacher is now *available* to take a facilitative role, and if kids are struggling, to give individual attention while the rest of the students work along in their kid-led group” (Daniels 37). Literature circles give teachers more time to confer with students, assess student progress and individualize instruction more precisely than frequent whole-class novel studies allow.

When considering utilizing literature circles, a teacher must be clear on what literary skills he wants students to develop and practice as they read. I have used literature circles for many different units that focus on a variety of literacy skills. I have used literature circles to conduct genre studies, allowing students to explore key components of the genre in their literature circle texts. I have utilized them for theme studies, requiring students to examine how an author crafts his/her message through story. I have also used literature circles for author studies, presenting many texts by the same author so students can seek what they texts reveal about the writer. No matter what common thread ties all of the literature circle text options together, I am clear as to which reading skills my students will develop as they read.

Once a teacher is clear on what his instructional objectives are for the literature circles, he should select appropriate texts. I am fortunate enough to work in a school district that supports such purchases. If teachers do not, though, there are several ways to get the right books into the right students’ hands. The best way is through the library. The interlibrary loan system in my county is a great resource. With a little advanced notice, your school or town librarian can help you track down four copies of the books. If books are not an option, teachers can use literature circles to explore different short stories, articles or poetry as well. When selecting texts, teachers should consider students’ reading proficiency levels, their interests and their reading history. Literature circles will not be effective if a teacher chooses six options, none of which the students can, or want, to read.

I usually present the five or six book options to my students, depending on my class

size. I want between four and five students in each literature circle. I give a book talk for each title and pass around copies of the books for students to peruse. I also post links to professional and reader book reviews on our class web page. Usually for a homework assignment, I ask them to rank their top three book choices and write a brief explanation as to why they have chosen it.

Despite what some teachers claim will happen, students do not choose a text simply because it is the shortest option. After my pep talk about how great it is that they can decide what they want to closely study for the next three weeks, students feel empowered to choose a book that best suits them. I ask them to rank their top three choices, so I have some flexibility in the groupings. Most of the time students read their first or second choice.

Harvey Daniels, of course, provides teachers the best information on how to manage the day-to-day progression of literature circles. I find they work best when students have the defined roles he suggests. Daniels offers many variations of how to make good use of the roles including group role sheets, individual role sheets, and journals (100 - 105). No matter how teachers implement lit circles, they must be student-centered. Students drive the conversations. Students set the reading assignments; they are more accountable to their circle peers, really, than they are to me. If students are unprepared, the group suffers, and students do not want to let down their peers.

However, teachers should not view literature circle days as ones they spend at their desks grading papers. They are “kid-watching with care, balancing between challenging each child and sustaining, above all, the love of reading, writing, and talking about books” (Daniels 37). Throughout the literature circles, teachers move about the classroom, listening into the discussions, assessing students’ comprehension, and offering guidance to encourage careful contemplation of the text.

Teachers also incorporate mini-lessons into literature circle days. These lessons provide students the instruction they need about particular reading and analytical skills as well as give them the opportunity to immediately apply their learning to a text. Harvey Daniels and Nancy Steinke have written an excellent book, *Mini*

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Lessons for Literature Circles, which outlines many sample lessons.

Recently, my twelfth grade students participated in literature circles in which they read True Crime books. My goals for the unit included examining how writers use research to craft a narrative around true events, how writers build tension with diction, syntax, and structure, and how writers utilize foreshadowing to keep the reader engaged. Whether my students were reading *In Cold Blood*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* or *The Man in the Rockefeller Suit*, all students participated in ten to fifteen minutes whole-class sessions in which we examined models of foreshadowing, for example, in various texts. Within their literature circles, then, students dedicated time to identify examples of foreshadowing in their texts and evaluate whether or not it is done effectively. As I visited with groups, I inquired where they saw the device used in their books and offered more support when students did not demonstrate a thorough understanding of this literary technique. (Daniels 37).

I have also utilized literature circles for teaching poetry. I provide students several poets from which they could select. After ranking their preferences and getting assigned their groups, students engage in a very focused, in depth study of one poet's work. Throughout the unit, I give mini-lessons on poetic form, line breaks, imagery, rhythm, and more. They search their poet's works to see how he or she utilized these techniques in the poems.

Free Reading

Frequently I hear English teachers proclaim, "These kids don't read on their own anymore." They insist their students from the good old days were readers, voracious ones at that. But these kids these days, according to many teachers, do not read. I do not know if they are right. Perhaps they are. However, my response is usually, "How much time do you give them to read a book of their choosing in the class?" Often I hear how *they* don't have time to include such a luxury as free reading time in their classrooms. They have curriculum to cover. They have books to teach. It should not surprise middle and high school teachers that kids don't read. In elementary classrooms, most teachers incorporate some time for free reading. Students get to choose a book

from buckets, curl up on a carpet or sit at their desk, and read. Some might argue free reading is a necessary component of elementary classrooms as students are learning to read, but middle and high school students have mastered reading comprehension so free reading wastes time. Yet, aren't we always learning to read? As students explore new subject areas and new interests, they need to learn how to read increasingly sophisticated texts that allow them to explore these ideas. By not making time in daily lessons for free reading, we show students their own reading lives are not valuable to their school lives. It is a dangerous message.

In her recent book, *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina and Passion in Adolescent Readers*, Penny Kittle states, "If students...enter college as practiced non-readers, they will likely become part of the large number of students who will not finish. Something has to change in high school to prepare kids better" (21). She is right. We do not prepare students to build the reading muscles they need to meet the demands of higher education. As she explains, average college students read "200-600 pages each week" (20). If they spend four years of high school reading 25 to 30 pages a week, they are woefully unprepared to meet this expectation.

With only rare exceptions for school-adjusted schedules or assessments, my class begins every day with ten minutes of free reading. My students cherish these ten minutes. I cherish watching them read. Nine minutes and 30 seconds into our reading time, I announce, "Start looking for a place to put your bookmark." Thirty seconds later when I say, "Okay, it's time," I secretly smile at those students who are still reading the pages even as they ever-so-slowly close their book covers.

When we discuss their reading lives, too many of my students quietly confess they cannot remember the last time they read a book. "Not even for English class?" I inquire.

Their eyes drop to the floor. "Nope. Not even for English class."

However, ten minutes a day is all some of them need to rediscover or create reading lives. My students tell me they find themselves thinking about their free reading books and can't help but pick it up at night or on the weekend to keep reading. I encourage them to read 20 minutes or so outside of class as well, and many do. After

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reading Penny Kittle's text *Book Love*, I recognized the power in asking students to record how many pages they read each day (28). As they review their weekly data of how many pages they have read, they gauge whether they are ready to tackle the reading challenges that lie ahead of them in college. They set reading goals, committing to read 100 pages in one week, quite a jump from the 17 pages they started the year reading in the same amount of time. When they reach this goal, the pride they feel lasts longer and inspires them more than any A they receive on a test. Next week, they want to read more than they did the week before. Next month, they want to read a book that challenges them a bit. They feel ready for it. They are. Their reading muscles grow stronger every day.

As we engage in other literacy studies, I invite their free reading books into our work. When we study point of view, for example, I'll ask students to think about the point of views used in their books. They might write about how the point of view in their English text compares with that used in their free reading book. I'll ask them to think about which perspective they prefer and why. I'll ask them to think about how that information can inform their future reading choices. When we study inferences, I'll inquire how their authors reveal information in interesting ways. They will search through their books and find a passage that does this exact thing. They'll include these lines in the journal entry, maybe using them later when composing an analytical essay. In *Book Love*, Kittle also explains how she uses their free reading texts to teach the qualities of writing (65), analytical writing (107), and more. She notes, "Jumping into analysis when students are still trying to figure out plot can be frustrating" (107). In an English classroom that only teaches one novel at a time, then, many students spend nearly every day feeling frustrated. When students

read and analyze texts they chose, they can apply difficult analytical work to books that better match their reading levels. Most students are amazed that authors they enjoy use the same techniques as Camus or Fitzgerald. In their astonishment, though, I see validation. Their reading lives co-exist with their school lives. Their reading lives, they learn, are important.

Balanced Approach

In my classroom, I still teach whole-class novels. This year we will read three whole texts together. They will participate in three literature circles. They will also read hundreds of pages from books they select for free reading. Additionally, they participate in an extensive inquiry project where they choose what to study, and therefore, read. Each writing assignment gives them three or four choices from which to select, and I always leave them the option to design their own, as long as it meets the objectives I will assess. I design my lessons with clear objectives and an open mind to design a "student's road map for learning" (Tomlinson 2) to help them master these skills.

A student in my class recently said, "Ms. Rocco, I have never been given so many choices about what and how to learn before."

Slightly startled I asked, "Vin, how does it make you feel to have options?"

His wide eyes and gaping mouth told me I had asked him a really stupid question. "It's awesome."

I no longer subscribe to the belief that every student must read [insert book title here]. I do believe every student, though, must read. If English educators focus on literacy rather than literature, we will build dynamic communities of readers and writers. If we present students with choices, including what they read, we will achieve this goal.

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Working/Mother

At the daycare you wait
in the chair by the front desk,
kicking your yellow rain boots,
your blonde hair, fine and feathery,
damp from the early morning downpour.

Your father had forgotten your shoes -
the ones I nearly drop
as I thrust them toward you.

"I need you to help me tie them,"
you murmur.
I glance desperately at the clock and the woman behind the desk;
Someone will help you, I say
before I dash back into the rain.

Here,
I say to my students that morning,
Here are my books of poetry.
Here are Yeats and Auden, Pastan and Plath.
Read them and find a poem that makes you feel your heart beat.
They stare at me as if I am an oddity
wandering in their adolescent world of lust
and longing.

That night before bed, I slide my fingers across your chest,
searching for the rhythm of your small heart.
You pull my hand
Closer, closer
As if to forgive me.

- Anne Wessel Dwyer

Anne Wessel Dwyer has been a teacher at Madison High School for eight years. She previously taught at Columbia High School in Maplewood, Wallkill Valley Regional High School, and St. Vincent Academy in Newark. Anne lives with her two sons, Aidan and Hogan, and her husband, Patrick, in South Orange.